The ACME In EGG EVOLUTION

Plus: Photos of the Penland Boarding House

The ACME In EGG EVOLUTION

A Case from Paranormal Investigator Jonathan Barron

Chaotic Terrain Press

Mickey Hunt

The Acme In Egg Evolution

A Case from Paranormal Investigator Jonathan Barron

Plus: Photos of the Penland Boarding House

Mickey Hunt

Chaotic Terrain Press
Asheville

Chaotic Terrain Press
230 Jones Cove Road
Asheville, North Carolina 28805
chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com

828-575-7300

Copyright © 2025 by Mickey Hunt
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior permission of Chaotic Terrain Press.

This story may be a work of fiction.

Photographs are by the author.
Protected by U.S. and international copyright laws.

ISBN 9798266707832

Printed in the United States of America.

Contents

The Acme in Egg Evolution 7

Penland Boarding House 57

Original photo used for the cover

*To the **Abandoned,***

Lost,

& Forgotten

The Acme In Egg Evolution

Tuesday
An Old Acquaintance

A bulgy, muscle man at a table across the lunch grill in the small Appalachian town I was visiting was laughing so loudly and so often I couldn't help but hate him. I was tempted to go over and tell him to shut up.

If the noisebox bothered the other diners, they didn't reveal it overtly. But there was one person in a nearby booth who glanced over at him whenever he issued an especially loud explosion.

The other observer looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place him. Across from him sat a boy, and close beside him sat an attractive, young, grim-faced Hispanic woman. She might have seemed unpleasant except she unexpectedly flashed a beautiful, charming smile every other minute during which her hardness melted. She also was holding a baby that she frequently cooed at and presently brought to her breast and covered with a shawl. Clearly, the couple was married.

But the man. He was my age, and looked so familiar, all I needed was a tiny clue to remind me where and when I knew him.

The clue appeared a few minutes later when a local hillbilly sort of person in faded coveralls walked up to their table, shook his hand and said, "Nice to see you, Mr. Barron."

Jonathan Barron. JT Barron, or just "JT". We had been frat mates in college. We weren't close, and my class was two years more advanced than his, but he did create a lasting impression with his scary conspiracy theories (many of which later proved to be

true) and with his physical competence. He never made a show of it, but in any wild stunts we played at the fraternity, he was always strongest, fastest, and most agile, especially in escaping justice.

None of this, however, was of interest to me now. But because of a knotty and uncanny income tax case I came to investigate in this backwater county in the mountains of North Carolina, I was suddenly inspired to talk with him in relation to his reputation as a paranormal investigator. It might be a good opportunity to gain some insight.

"There you are, Vernon Rose, himself," he said, as I walked up to the table. He shook my hand warmly and introduced me to his family. "My lovely wife, Isabel, our son, Scotty, and the new one here, Abby." Isabel silently shook my hand with a curious mix of suspicion and warmness, followed by Scotty who said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Rose."

"You've been raised correctly," I said to the boy. "How old are you?"

"I am 10, sir."

Jonathan said they were just finishing up their lunch, and the wife and kids had planned to get ice cream, but he had a few minutes and would like to talk with me. Before she left, his wife whispered something in his ear.

We soon realized that because each of us knew the outline of the other's career, there wasn't much to say in that regard.

"I don't have time now—have to catch up with the family—we are on vacation—but what brings you to Rockcastle County? This is a long way from your office in DC."

"There's too much background to go into details now, but the short version is, years ago, the county had selected a cove in the mountains here as a possible watershed. You know, acquire the land, build a dam and pipe it to the urban areas. The cove was ideal—2172 acres of somewhat level land, framed within isolated mountains—a whole drainage. For reasons unknown, the county

went for another, larger cove. It was adequate and still is, but the water required a little more treatment. Not an issue, really.

"The rejected cove reverted to the US Forest Service. The problem is, the land was never within the national forest in the first place, but was privately held by a family who settled here as some of the first Europeans in these mountains, back in the late 1700s."

"Yes," Jonathan said, "I know the story. Please continue."

"Stop me if I'm covering ground unnecessarily."

"No, no. I want to hear your perspective."

"So, the family and their descendants lived on this land ever since then. The last two survivors recently passed away. The problem is, in all those years—decades and centuries—they never paid any property taxes, and when the county found out, they seized the land intending to sell it to recover the taxes, but they also found out that this old couple had never gotten social security numbers. The county then notified the state of North Carolina and us, the IRS, saying that we might wish to make a claim against the funds from the sale to cover unpaid federal income taxes."

"Well, that's pretty factual—it's what I've heard."

"You seem to know a lot about it. There's been almost nothing in the press."

"Not yet and maybe never," JT said. "But the people who live here all know it."

"Doesn't that seem odd to you, that the family never paid any taxes, in all these years?"

"Not if you know the maps were all wrong and the USFS thought the land was managed by the county, but the county never sent property tax bills because they thought the Forest Service 'owned' it. Not if you know the people around here."

"The old couple never even put out a mailbox," I said, shaking my head. "Their parents never had a mailbox."

"That's what I mean."

I had hoped Jonathan might bring up that this area was a Bermuda Triangle or better, a Brigadoon or Shangri-La where time stood still, but he was not forthcoming. I was miffed, and the hyena who had been irritating me in the grill since I had arrived finally got under my skin: the someone in the restaurant who had

been talking and laughing loudly the whole time. I scooted my chair back and stood up so I could stare at him over another diner.

I didn't have to ask Jonathan because he told me. "The loudmouth body-builder is the county's School Board Chairman, and the person who he's talking with is the judge who is handling the very case we've been discussing. Also, the silent ones at the table are the county commission chairman and the tax assessor."

"Oh." I had nothing I could say.

"I'll tell you what, let me give you a tour of the county. You'll learn a whole lot more if you're with me than if you go snooping around here on your own. Your fellow government officials over there will be of no help to you whatsoever. Let's talk to the local people and hear what they have to say."

"Sounds good to me. Since there are no records…"

"One thing, however. My wife is a former police officer, and she can tell you're carrying a firearm. Leave the gun at your motel room."

I was embarrassed. "They told me at the office that federal agents are not welcomed here. The moonshine and revenuer days."

"Nobody here will shoot you. But they won't talk, either. Or they'll be friendly and talk and talk, but not tell you anything."

"How do you know so much?"

"My grandfather built a cabin here years ago. We come back for a month every summer."

"Did your grandfather pay his property taxes?" I asked, hoping to lighten the mood before we parted.

"That's not funny."

"Sorry. I'll pick you up at 9:AM."

"I'll drive. You can't take your government car."

"That native hostility to the feds?"

"It doesn't matter where you are, coast to coast in this whole country, a US Government tag on your shiny new car will not invite trust and confidence. Nor your new hiking boots. Where are you staying?"

"The Mountaineer Inn. The Cement Pond."

"Perfect."

We were poised to leave, but a commotion across the diner caught our attention. The government officials had all risen and

were making their way to the exit. If I thought the School Board Chairman had been too loud, I had not yet heard him on his hind legs, greeting diners right and left with bone-crushing handshakes, the judge and other officials meekly skulking behind him.

Wednesday
Interviews

The following morning, when JT picked me up in his older black Toyota SUV, I brought up the subject I'd been thinking about all night. "About trust: I sense a little hostility from you. How do I know you won't take me to people who will tell me exactly what you want them to say?"

"Fair question, and I already thought you might suspect this, so, you say who you want to talk with. All I suggest is make it random and comprehensive. But hey, I'm sorry for the way I'm coming across. I'm more than a little bitter about what's about to happen here. It's not the IRS, but local and state government who are the villains."

"What's going to happen? I'm in the dark."

"The memorial for Mr. and Mrs. Siler is the day after tomorrow. And the auction of their property the very next day."

"Holy cow? Why so quickly?"

"The county has been salivating over this property for 15 years. But they knew the optics would be bad if they kicked Rufus and Josephine off their homestead. They waited until they died."

"Couldn't the estate take the matter to court? Get an emergency injunction to prevent the sale?"

"There are no heirs, and the couple didn't have a lawyer. The county kept it all a secret until the day the couple died a few days ago."

"And the county judge is already best buddies with the local officials."

Sheesh, I thought, maybe I should come back later, but then it would be too late. My bosses wanted to get on the list of debtors as soon as possible. "Who is the executor of the estate?"

"They left no will, but the judge appointed a neighbor."

"Who is he, she?"

"We'll meet him tomorrow, if you want. He's a college student. But who shall we talk to today?"

The first on my list on the cool summer morning was the local Postmaster. I thought, being a federal employee, they might be a little bit sympathetic. A safe place for me to begin.

JT threw me off my guard when he introduced me to Mrs. Cobb in her office saying, "Mr. IRS is talking to people to determine if the Rufus Silers owe any back income taxes."

She stared at me a long time until I began to sweat, and then she relented.

"In 35 years as postmaster, I never saw them with any money. Not so much as a nickel."

"Did they send mail?"

She looked uncomfortable, her head trembling a little. And said, "They did mail out a few Christmas cards to missionaries."

"How did they get stamps?"

"They gave me a dozen eggs, and I bought the stamps myself and put them on the envelopes. Home-made envelopes."

"A dozen eggs?"

"Every month, all year. Sometimes a box of fruit."

"For a few stamps?"

"They were the most generous people in the world. They came here to the post office once a month and always asked at the desk for their mail. We kept cardboard boxes for them, and a few others. If something came that looked important, I took it out to the Siler's place myself, and they gave me another dozen eggs."

I pulled out a notepad and pen and began, "Barter. Eggs." But JT stopped me with a fierce, "Ungh uh," and said, "No notes!"

"Are you coming to the auction on Saturday, Mr. IRS?"

"I hadn't thought I would".

"You should. There may be fireworks, if you know what I mean. The Sheriff is best buddies with the county and state people, but half his deputies are with the Siler interests. They've volunteered to do guard duty. And where are you staying?"

I wasn't going to tell her, but JT did anyway. "The Mountaineer Inn."

"My cousins own that place. You look like a decent person. They'll take good care of you. The pond is scrumptious. It's spring-fed and no chemicals. The water is freshened every day. It's full of plants and a few frogs."

The postmistress took a breath and said, "Are you putting a hex on the county, Mr. Barron? Sending a haunting their way?"

I knew she was joking, but JT took her seriously. "I don't do that, ma'am. I've spent my entire life debunking fake paranormal experiences and exploring the rare real ones. I'm not about to join the other side—the delusional, paranoid, and outright charlatans. Besides, this gentleman (referring to me) will be able to sniff out fake stuff all by himself."

The conversation at the Post Office rattled me, and JT drove off with me having no clear idea of where I'd wanted to go next. In half a mile, there was a small garden market stand advertising sweet corn, and they were doing a brisk business. "Let's stop here," I said.

"Smart thinking. They'll be sold out in the next hour."

We waited in line. People weren't only buying sweet corn, but all sorts of fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as cut flowers.

I think JT was itching to suggest I talk with the girls at the stand, but it had already occurred to me. He did say I should wait until the corn sold out. After we each bought the minimum dozen ears at $6 a dozen, he asked the older girl if we could talk after the crowd thinned. We waited at an empty picnic table in the shade under some trees. JT walked across the street and brought back a couple sweet lemon ice cream cones.

"My favorite," he said.

By the time we were done with the ice cream, the last customer trucks and station wagons had gone, and the girl came over and sat down with us. She was about 14 or 15, had long braids down the

sides of her head, was wearing a floral cotton dress, and might have been Amish, but she was wearing a white floppy cotton hat and spoke with a decided mountain accent.

"Mr. IRS," she said, "How can I help you?"

"Tell me about your produce stand."

"I see… The stand belonged to Rufus and Josephine Siler. They worked it all by themselves, usually. And they aren't around anymore, so my sister and I took over. We pick everything in the morning before light and drive it down here."

"You can't be 16. You don't have a driver's license."

"No," and there was a little lilt at the end of the word that did indeed sound Amish or Scandinavian. "I drive Mr. Siler's truck. He taught me how."

"Well, I don't enforce driving laws. You're charging money for your produce. Did Mr. and Mrs. Siler charge, too?"

"No." This was different from the first No. "They always traded. People gave them homemade bread, raw milk, helped with chores, repairs to the outhouse. Stuff."

"That corn we got is worth twice of what we paid," JT said. "It should be $12 a dozen, or more."

"It's what they would have wanted. We're putting the money towards a fancy warping wheel for our mom. And by the way, thank you, Mr. Barron, for the generous tip."

I hadn't noticed he had done that and I reached for my wallet.

"It's not necessary, Mr. IRS. Are you going to the funeral on Friday? If you want to learn something about Mr. and Mrs. Siler, you should."

"What are your names, your sister and you? Sorry, I forgot to ask you earlier."

"We are Silers"

"Are you related to Rufus and Josephine?"

She looked at me like I had no right to call them by their first names. Or, maybe that I was being snoopy. "Related? If you go back five or six generations. We are cousins twice removed."

As we drove away, I said, "I can only eat three ears tonight. My room has a grill on the patio outside. I'll give you the rest."

"Sounds fine to me!" he replied.

All the people we talked with that day told the same story. Nobody had seen Mr. and Mrs. with money. They traded for everything they needed. They produced a host of different farm or forest products from their land, or they let others do the harvest in exchange for work on their place. The librarian said Mr. Siler brought them donations of books from a thrift shop. The local fire chief said his church held Easter Sunrise services up in their cove every spring and his son cut firewood from downed trees, stacked several cords for the couple's winter and sold the rest. A guy hanging out at an old relic of a hardware store in the middle of nowhere said he sold bundles of a sort of wild garlic called ramps that they allowed him to dig in the woods early in the spring when they were in season.

Quite a few people had never heard of them, and it turned out they usually were newcomers. I was hoping I could find one person who would say something negative about them, and by the end of the day I was frustrated. So, I thought I'd try one more person. Up ahead, we spotted a propane fuel truck in a pullout along the road. A man who carried a good many former smoked chicken dinners with mashed potatoes and gravy tucked about his middle was stomping up and down beside the truck, kicking the air, and shouting curses. Surely he'd find nothing good to say about anybody. JT stopped and I got out, but JT said, "Let me talk. He might take a swing at a stranger. You come along behind."

"Last delivery of the day and she decided to break down!" he said to JT, still steaming.

"Have you called a tow truck?"

"What do you think? The only guy who could come is that slime, Whitson, who patrols parking lots and locks your vehicle in his yard. He charges twice the regular amount for a tow. He's an hour late and I'll probably miss my daughter's violin recital."

"I'll drive you to the recital. My family is going, too. I'm sure you can leave the truck here overnight and get Clive Duback out first thing in the morning."

"You're a saint. Okay, I'm cancelling Whitson. He probably hasn't even left the house."

During the drive to the community center where the recital was to be held, none of us talked, and the propane truck driver in the back grumbled and stewed to himself. I'm sure it was him who was stinking up the atmosphere in the vehicle.

JT rolled down his window and said, "Mr. IRS here would like to ask you a question."

"You're kidding! Is he a friend of yours?"

"Not exactly, but he's here looking into the finances of Rufus and Josephine."

At this, the delivery driver suddenly transformed. His grumbling changed into a happy hum, he fumbled with something and handed up a piece of clear rag with a round, hard object wrapped up inside. "Open it. Open it. But don't drop it."

Inside was a rock.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked me.

I had no idea.

"It's a sapphire," JT said. "A big one."

"No kidding," the driver said. "I've had it assayed. It's a star. Mr. Siler gave me this last year. He found it in his creek."

"Why did he give it to you?" I asked.

"What kind of question is that? Why do you think?"

"You tell me."

The driver muttered a one-word obscenity to accompany "finances" and said no more. And said no more in my presence during the whole recital. I have to admit I fell asleep in my chair. It had been a long day.

It was quiet on the drive back to the Mountaineer Inn. JT dropped me in the parking lot in front of my room and said, "See you tomorrow, first thing?"

"I thought we could drive up to the Siler property."

"That's what I'd suggest," he said. "I'll bring my son along—he loves going up there. You know, the driver has been supplying fuel to Mr. and Mrs. Siler for the past few winters. They burned wood for heat and cooking all their lives, but it got harder as they aged."

"They paid for the propane with gems."

That's not how it happened, but I suppose you could connect the two. Not gems. One gem. While you were sleeping tonight, the driver presented it to his daughter for her college education. She's going away to nursing school in the fall."

"How much is the stone worth?"

"I'd estimate four full years and longer."

"'You tell me,' was the wrong thing to say to him, right?"

"It's exactly what a smart-ass cop would say."

Thursday
Tour of the Siler Property

"Sorry. I thought I'd be later," JT said when he picked me up. "Scotty and I went to breakfast at the diner near our cabin. The parking lot was jammed as usual, but we got a table when we walked in the door and service soon afterwards, so now I'm early."

"Not a problem," I said. "I'm not sure you're aware of how respected you are."

He laughed and said, "Maybe. But I *am* aware of how hated I am in some circles."

The drive out to Siler's cove was unbelievable. Once we turned off the highway and crossed a bridge after we passed a convenience store with gas pumps, all I could see was groomed green fields, white farm houses—with a double-wide now and then—and barn after barn, each one with intricate angular patterns of the sideboards, and its own arrangement of roof lines. If I had an extra life to live, I might enjoy studying and archiving the designs of barns and their changes over time. The further we drove, the older and better-kept the barns and houses seemed to be..

Cows, sheep, and horses in the pastures. Expanses of tomatoes. Fields of waist-high corn.

"Is this the Siler land?"

"Not yet. The corn is for livestock feed, silage. It and the tomatoes are more commercial operations, but still local."

We drove another mile and turned down a paved side road posted with a No Outlet sign. This road shortly came to a fork, both prongs of which were gravel. A half dozen mailboxes faced

the road, and behind them leaned the ruin of a log house that someone was dismantling by hand.

"End of the state maintenance," JT said. "On the right is the southern edge of their land. The left goes up to some houses."

We turned right and followed the new, well-graded gravel through stately hardwood forest up an incline. At the top of the gap, the new gravel abruptly ended, and the road ahead basically looked like a double path across the forest floor.

JT pulled over and turned off the engine. He and Scotty hurried out into the trees, he to the left and Scotty right. I was fine, so I waited, walking ahead to look at the road. It was hard-packed with old, fine, brown gravel in two tire paths with small plants growing on a band between. The keen air was delightfully invigorating for beginning a day in high summer.

When they returned, both looking relieved, JT said. "This is when the property begins."

"Can I roll the windows down now?" Scotty asked.

Three people on foot passed us walking swiftly down from the old road. An unleashed black and white dog ran ahead and darted to the side, pausing to sniff at this and that, and paying us no attention as it covered twice the ground of the humans.

The people smiled, waved, and wished us "Good morning" without breaking stride.

No Trespassing signs. A notice of the upcoming auction.

We loaded back into the SUV and headed through the gap and down. The road curved gently right and left through the dark, thick trees and emerged into bright sunlight and green.

JT said nothing, waiting for my reaction, maybe.

"This is a paradise!" I exclaimed.

I don't know what he had expected me to say, but his reaction to me was unexpected.

"Don't! Don't…" His hands tightened on the steering wheel. "That's not a popular word around here."

"What? Paradise?"

"You'll find out later. Just don't say it where someone local can hear you. This has been Screaming Panther Cove since Europeans first settled here and long before. It's translated from the native language."

We continued up the sloping gravel road, climbing through emerald fields and pastures fenced with barbed wire on rough wooden posts. Shaded islands of enormous spreading oak trees. Grazing cattle. A high ridge of undulating rises and falls encircled the cove, a rock outcrop poking out from the steeper places.

Across the way, a long-legged man followed a team of mules pulling a cultivator through rows of cabbage plants.

Some fields contained corn of various heights waving in the breeze, some in tassel. As we passed one field, I exploded with a sneeze that made JT jump. Scotty in the back said, "Pollen."

Presently, we came to gardens. I couldn't tell what food plants were growing there, but flowers seemed to be everywhere. Two people wearing wide straw hats were hoeing in a tobacco patch. Next, we came to a huge old barn with a rusted steel roof and beyond that stood what might be the centerpiece of the property, a great, white, two-story house.

JT parked next to an ancient mechanical contraption that might or might not still work, stepped out of the SUV, and looked around. He then cupped his hands and called toward the house, "Hallo! Hallo!"

"Come on up!" came a voice right back.

Scotty jumped out of the SUV and started up the hill like a jackrabbit. "See you, Pop!" he said over his shoulder.

"Be back in an hour!" JT called after him, and the boy raised his hand to show he had heard.

"Where's he going?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. He has friends up there, I believe."

We trudged toward the house, and at the bottom of the solid wooden front steps, the voice said, "Nice to see you again." JT didn't reply until he reached the deep, covered deck porch that appeared to circle 3/4ths of the house—the front and two sides. I followed close behind him. I squinted into the shadow as JT said, "Thanks. Good to see you, too. Clinton, this is Mr. Rose. He's visiting here to learn something about Mr. and Mrs. Siler. He's not with us yet, but he's almost on our team."

"Yeah, IRS. Welcome, sir. You all have a seat and make yourself at home. I mean, drag those rockers over here. Forgive me while I keep working."

We pulled the heavy chairs closer to him. He was of college age, sitting on a smaller, upright chair, and had an almost identical one before him, and he was spraying water from a bottle onto wooden strips and weaving them across the chair's frame.

"Clinton is re-caning the chair."

"These are hickory bark splits, or splints. This chair and the ones you are sitting on are made with seven different species of wood. No nails, and no glue."

"Nice. Can Mr. Rose ask you some questions?"

"Fire away."

I didn't know where to start. I had given up my official investigation. Overnight, I decided there was no way I was going to audit the bartering that went on in this region, let alone try to collect taxes on this couple. This had become a personal investigation. It was the weekend and I was in no hurry to return to the noise and frenetic life of DC.

"So, maybe you can tell me what's going on. With the county and land. Haven't they seized the property? How is it you are still here?"

"They *think* they have seized it. Mr. Siler invited me here when I finished high school, and this is where I live in the summers and holidays. I'm keeping an eye on the place. Most of the people around this area are decent, but a few might believe they can help themselves to whatever they want. Antique dealers and drug addicts."

"Are you having an estate sale?"

"What for?"

"There's a lot of unsettled business," JT said. "The only sure thing is the auction on the day after tomorrow."

"That's not so certain, either."

"The county thinks so," I said.

"As far as I'm concerned, the county can go jump in the lake." He paused a moment and then smiling, finished with, "The Lake of Fire, if you know what I mean."

I didn't know what more to say, so I asked, "What are you studying in college?"

"I'm pre-law with double history and communications majors."

"Sounds challenging."

"It's fun. I hope to practice Constitutional Law, specializing in the 5th Amendment."

Sorry to say, I couldn't remember the specifics of the 5th Amendment. I'm an accountant. I hadn't read the U.S. Constitution since college days.

Clinton could tell and said, "Don't worry. You are in good company. A couple of those federal judges don't know what it's about either."

JT said, "John Locke."

"Right. He's a start. To summarize: Property taxes on homesteads—where people have title to and live—are unconstitutional. Otherwise, you are renting your house and land from the government. Added to this, due process in application of eminent domain is a corrupt joke. I can give you instance after instance. Lastly, 'just compensation' is most often wholly unjust. No amount of money in the universe can replace Screaming Panther Cove or anybody's home, for that matter."

"Some of our governors are discussing abolishing property taxes on primary residences," JT said. "They say it will make home ownership more affordable."

I leaned back in the rocker. The boy continued working on his chair. I could hear crows in the trees talking to one another, a hummingbird darted in and out to the red flowered vines growing over the porch; It sang a high cheep and zoomed to a telephone line to rest a moment. For the first time, I took in the long view, which I think was south. Blue layers of mountain ridges going back and back forever. Above the nearby treeline I could see nothing man-made. No cell towers, blinking lights, road cuts, houses on mountain sides, or notches on the ridges.

JT had closed his eyes and was nodding.

"There." The boy set the chair down with a clunk and said, "Done. I mean the re-seating. I didn't make the chair."

JT opened his eyes.

"Where did you learn this skill?" I asked. "Mr. Siler?"

"He took me up into the woods and we cut the very hickory log on the mountainside and dragged it down here with a mule."

"It's too late for this time, but I can help set up legal protections against taxes," I offered.

"You mean like conservation easements, or tax breaks for timber improvement?" he replied. "We don't need government permission. I'm writing a paper for a summer online course. "Life, Liberty, and Property Tax." My thesis is that the government lets you live and be free as long as you allow it to rob you."

Well, JT could see I had no more listening left in me. He stood up stiffly, stretched, and said, "Can we look around?"

"Go ahead. I'm not going to join you. I have work."

Trigged by JT's stretch, the boy completed one of his own, and a yawn, when I asked, "Getting ready for the auction?"

He finished his yawn and replied, "Oh, I'm ready for the auction, or whatever happens. Are you?"

We descended the steps. JT asked me what I wanted to see.

"Anything, everything."

"Okay, let's walk up the road toward the forest."

The property looked every bit like a living 19th-century hamlet. Well-preserved wooden barns, sheds, and other miscellaneous buildings. I would have expected tall weeds growing in every out-of-the way corner, but they were sprucely trimmed or had a tree planted there, and the paths going to each structure seemed worn down as if actively used. It was a living museum, but without people in old costumes reciting their scripts.

A column of smoke rose above one building that had a covered portico and wooden posts holding up the roof. As we walked closer, there was a low, glowing fire inside an open stove.

"A blacksmith shop," JT said. "I think Clinton is working on a project with the forge. Back there, those trees were figs; I didn't know they'd survive the winters here."

We continued up along a creek through pastures lined by trees. Along the way, JT pointed out things. "Paw paw trees loaded this year, persimmons, a raspberry patch, pears, apples."

Up ahead lay a steep bank covered with a short cropped grass. An earthen dam. As we climbed the gently sloped land, some hairy heads rose above the top edge of the dam. Soon we saw the several young boys and a girl fishing along the edge of a pond, spread out along the pond. All of them somberly serious and focused on their lines in the water. Just then, one of the boys jerked his pole back a little and began reeling in, in spurts. The water of the pond thrashed in green and silver around his fishing line. The boy was patient, playing the fish's fight out until he brought it right to the shoreline and scooped it from the water in a small net. I thought the other children would run over to look, but they all stayed where they were, intent, and just then, another boy had a fish on, too.

"Let's not bother the kids. They mean business."

"What kind of fish was that?"

"A bass, I think."

"I'm not a racist or anything like that, but all the children except Scotty were brown. Native? What's the story?"

"They and their parents live here, up one of the side coves."

I waited for him to say more, but when I figured that was all, I said, "Oh."

The road continued along the pond and curved around a patch of cattails and blue irises growing at the edge and into the water. Redwing blackbirds complained about our presence, and a tall stork or another bird like it lifted off and flew to the other corner of the pond.

"There's nothing more up here to see," I said, as we came to more trees and beyond it, thick forest. "Just a half-rotting bench."

JT said nothing but sat down on the bench as I stood there impatiently looking at him. "The bench is black locust and chestnut. It's over 100 years old and will be here and serviceable when you and I are long gone. At least, if it doesn't get dug up." He motioned for me to sit down. "Have a seat. Tell me what you see and what you *don't* hear."

The view. The view from the bench was as impressive as the one from the porch, but more so. Wider, longer, higher. And from there, it was almost all sky with magnificent clouds flowing

almost imperceptibly right to left. "What do I not hear?" I listened a while, taking in all of it. "I hear a distant jet passing overhead, but…. I don't hear the interstate. I don't hear any motors at all. Not a lawnmower or a chainsaw. It's peaceful."

"This is what will be lost when the sale happens the day after next. And I don't wish to insult you, but we haven't even begun to explore the forest behind us. The people in this area won't ever say this, but they don't disrespect you for being an IRS agent half as much as they do you for being a city dweller who is ignorant of the beauty and value of a natural world lightly touched by people. They also pity you, knowing it's not your fault."

I didn't know what to say at first. JT hadn't said this with anger or contempt. He just said it straight out, which made it easy for me to answer, "You're probably right."

"You're a perceptive guy, so I have hope for you. There are one or two other things you missed. Look down there to the right in the tall grass."

I stood up and could barely see the top of rows of upright stones. "A cemetery! How far back in time do those graves go?"

"All the way back to before European settlers arrived and forward to the present. You can't see the fresh mounds from here, but Rufus and Josephine are buried there."

"You realize the developers can't move a cemetery."

I said this as we walked down the road toward JT's SUV.

"Yeah, they say the family will always have access. It's a PR selling point. But all the buildings and gardens will go. Even the pond," he said as Scotty ran over with three good-sized fish hanging on the crook of a tennis-racket-sized tree branch.

"Can I look at the chickens before we leave?" he asked excitedly.

"Do we have time?" JT asked me. He looked up at the sky, which had been darkening.

"How could we not have time to look at the chickens?" I said with a laugh.

"It looks like it might rain," he said.

On the way down, Scotty handed me the fish and lunged into some tall grass, flushing out a rabbit that scampered and bounded into another patch of grass. Scotty bounded back to us and reclaimed the fish. "My friends call these and the rabbits 'fast food.'"

"Fast food?" I asked, needing clarification about his seemingly inaccurate expression.

"Yeah. Fast food is fast. You have to catch it. Slow food is what you grow. Or, you know, buy at the grocery store."

We took a side path toward the chicken shed and yard. The chickens, however, were not in the fenced-in yard, but running loose, scattered around the pasture. As we approached, the two Siler sisters were throwing out some old feed grain. The chickens stormed over and began snapping up the grain.

"Want to help us collect eggs?" the younger sister asked Scotty while gazing at the sky.

The star-struck boy only nodded and walked right through the shed's door, the sisters following with their baskets in hand. The door closed itself automatically.

"They don't normally give the chickens grain this time of year, but this must be old stuff from the feed store. Grass, worms, and grasshoppers make up their primary diet in the summer."

We heard the complaining growls of the hens sitting on their nests. An "Oww" from one of the children whose hand had been pecked. While we waited, a weird high-pitched whining buzz descended upon us from above. I instinctively ducked. A drone.

The older girl ran out and glared fiercely at the hovering object. It was surely a coincidence that a stiff breeze suddenly stirred the trees around the pasture, which heightened the effect. She looked around at the trees, then jumped up and down, waving her arms as she attempted to get the remote pilot's attention. The drone spun toward her and closed in a little. She jumped one more time, flipped it a double bird, and shouted, "If Rufus were still here, he'd shoot you down!" She turned, and as she reentered the shed, she muttered, "We are almost done. Dammed developers."

The drone whirled itself away.

When I got over the shock of her vehemence, I said, "Definitely not Amish."

Scotty popped out through the door, red-cheeked and holding something round and big in his hand. The girls followed him, their baskets full of eggs: brown, green, and ivory. Some with a little chicken poop stuck to their shells. The girls unceremoniously gave JT a half-dozen eggs in a quart-sized, woven "strawberry hallock", as the older girl called it..

"What have you got there?" I asked Scotty.

"Can I, Pop?" he said, waving what he held in his hand back and forth.

"What do the girls think?"

"Knock yourself out."

Scotty trotted over to a large boulder, wound up, and heaved the object in his hand at the boulder. The object, an egg, broke with a sickening, crunchy wallop, and as we happened to be downwind, we caught the odiferous aroma of sulfur and who-knows-what rotting, putrification chemicals.

"Scotty found an egg we missed a long time ago," the younger girl said, as a few heavy raindrops began plunking down.

"A bad egg is metaphorical for so-called progress and development," the older sister said. "I remember that from my favorite book as a child. If you don't hurry, you'll be wet."

"Vanessa, honey, I'm going to stay here over the weekend. I'll get back on Sunday," I said to my wife by phone that evening.

"What? You know, your daughter is coming tonight for the weekend. I thought we'd do something fun with all three children. Like, get out of the city. Fly up to Bar Harbor like we've talked about. Catch the commuter flight from Boston."

"Yeah, this is too good to miss down here. This place is a paradise. Oh, I'm not supposed to say that! But the people here… The land… The culture… There's an auction on Saturday, and I have an idea I want to talk with you about."

"The children can only stand so many museum visits at the National Mall, especially in summer. The high on Saturday is expected to be almost 100."

"This place is a museum, but it's alive, and in the mountains. Temperatures in the 50s at night and no more than 85 in the middle of the day. Why don't…?"

"Then, that settles it. We all fly to Charlotte first thing in the morning, rent a car, and drive up. I'll use your travel miles."

"That's actually a brilliant idea. Get first class if coach is sold out. Tell the kids where I'm staying has a cement pond."

Friday
Memorial Service

My request to tell our two children (who I shared with Vanessa) about the pool was not necessary, because they had been listening in to the conversation and cheered like crazy. The phone call didn't last much longer because Vanessa wanted to make reservations right away, it was so last-minute. JT was busy, "very busy", he said, on Friday morning, but he offered to take me and our family with him to the Siler memorial service in the afternoon. We'd meet at the Mountaineer Inn and drive up in our separate vehicles.

"Are you sure it's appropriate for us to go to this service? We're strangers and I'm the IRS."

"You won't want to miss it. There'll be food and music. Bring sweaters because it gets cold when the sun sets."

I had some time on my hands in the morning, so I walked a few blocks down to the main street of town. It was not only the main street, but the only street, at least with any semblance of active business. Most of them antique stores and gift shops; there was one restaurant that only served suppers. One insurance office. A sad, saddle-making, western-wear store. One end of the street presented a fascinating storefront of a 1950s movie theater, but when I peeked through the boarded-up windows, there was no building! The roof had rotted and fallen in, and between the brick walls, pioneer trees had sprung up, the little private courtyard

suggestive of ancient Roman ruins. In the middle of the block rose up a three-story 1880s opera house that appeared to be in a state of suspended restoration. Somebody's money and/or enthusiasm ran out. The forlorn For Sale sign in a front window looked as old as the original construction. Then, at the far end of the block, the only maintained structure in town: the county courthouse, now closed because of the weekend.

All of this was fascinating, but the most impressive building of all was right across the street from the courthouse. The Law Office of Lester Gudger, a squat, two-story, stand-alone, weathered, clapboard-sided box with grubby windows. I peered through the lettered window. Piles of dusty files everywhere. No clear flat surfaces anywhere. It appeared as if Lawyer Gudger had worked through old age until his dying day—which was 10 years ago—and by then had no living clients left.

As things usually happen, Vanessa's last-minute travel arrangements did not work out perfectly, but she and the children arrived with enough time to settle into their adjoining rooms and cool off in the pool before we had to leave for the memorial service. The only thing truly awry was that my older daughter, Sophia's luggage got sent to Shymkent International Airport in Kazakhstan (CIT) instead of Charlotte (CLT), which, considering her gothic wardrobe, was a blessing in disguise.

Vanessa and the children were too tired from travel to go to the memorial, and Vanessa was just expressing that to me when JT showed up with his family. Scotty wanted to see the cement pond and ran around the inn as soon as he got out of the car, so JT and his wife Isabel followed him, and that's where they met my family. I introduced everyone around.

"You are kidding! Jonathan T. Barron, host of the internationally famous program Strange Days Radio! I don't believe it!" Sophia said, like he wasn't even there.

JT merely smiled in embarrassment as if this sort of rude occurrence happened to him every day. He's a person who never let fame change him.

"This changes everything!" Sophia continued. "I get to spend an evening with Jonathan T. Barron! She ran back into the

room and switched out of her impromptu bathing suit into her barely dry, but now clean, travel clothes.

She returned in a jiffy and said, "I'm riding with them."

The Barron boy had by then chatted up Willet and Plover, who decided to come after all to hear more of his wild ghost stories and to hang out with Sophia, whom they adored, and so he wanted to ride with us, and thus the swap was made.

"I guess if my children are going," Vanessa said with an exhausted sigh, "I will, too."

"I'm pretty sure you will enjoy yourself this evening, ma'am," JT said to her. "You can find yourself a quiet, shady corner and enjoy the music. It will be unforgettable."

On the drive out, the girls glued their noses to the windows and kept up a series of exclamations about what they were seeing.

The Barron boy pouted because he'd been upstaged by nature, and he grumbled to himself, "Have you never seen a cow?"

Plover answered back, "At the petting zoo, but I've never encountered a feral one in the wild."

"Those are milk cows, Jerseys, in fact. Not feral," he replied and was prepared to share more, but she was not impressed, and he sat back in his chair, defeated.

"Slow down, Vern," Vanessa said. "I'm feeling sick on these narrow, curvy roads."

"I am, too," Willet said.

"I have to keep up with Mr. Barron," I answered. "There's no internet up here and I'm afraid of getting lost."

"I'll call and ask him to slow down," Vanessa said, and started my phone to dialing JT.

Vanessa was about to learn what "No Internet" means when the Barron boy in the back piped up, "Don't worry, sir and ladies, I can get you there. I know the way," and this made him the hero again with our girls.

As we drove up toward the Silers' house and followed the waved instructions of Sheriff's deputies into a mowed field and parked in a line with dozens of other vehicles, everything about the event reminded me of videos I'd seen of old-time camp meetings, just like I expected. We followed the Barron boy around to a side of the old house that I hadn't seen on the first visit and found a shady grove of tall, wide trees below a wooden stage set up against yet another old, well-preserved barn. Signs for the auction were posted at random points under the trees. We sat down in two rows on the near outside edge. A violinist and an accordion player up front breathed out a mournful, haunting tune to tear your heart out. The seats filled up quickly.

A tall, handsome, red-faced man wearing a brown jacket and checkered pants took the podium and welcomed everyone. He asked us all to stand, then opened in prayer, and before the chorus of "Amens" had finished, he sprang into a hymn. No one had hymnals, and the name of the song had not been announced (there was no printed program) but, no matter, he sang the line by himself and then the whole crowd followed. It was like nothing I'd ever heard before. Slow—painfully slow—rising and falling, the music sad and full of the pain and ache of the entire human race, it seemed, about lives of suffering and death, but the words hopeful, and laden with joy of a better world, one we can only taste now.

After the song, the man at the podium paused and took several gulps of water from a clear goblet. He took a breath, then one more gulp, made a measured, walking start at his sermon, and in less than a minute was breathing fire and brimstone at full gallop. There was no sound system, but it wasn't needed, because the loudness of this voice was beyond mortal capacity. He droned on and on, and I have to admit it was off-putting. My girls were plugging their ears and rolling their eyes. The Barron boy was nodding along and taking notes, but I noticed he was wearing earplugs. JT and his wife also nodded and smiled along, chiming in an "amen, brother" along the way, but I noticed Isabel had covered their youngest one's ears.

Once I adapted to the sheer loudness, cadence, and accent of the speaker, I expected to hear bombast, repetitious, "pie in the sky, by-in-by" tripe about worldly sin and repentance, but I was shocked, actually shocked to hear what sounded like a nuanced analysis of culture, in particular of contemporary Christianity.

The best I could tell, since I missed the beginning of the sermon, it was about what the preacher was calling "The Poverty of the Church." What I was hearing was nearly what my own cynical thoughts had been ever since high school. But put far more eloquently and painted into a whole uniform, systematic, cohesive constellation that appeared to make it an anti-Christian sermon—an anti-sermon. He critiqued the poverty of:

1. Community
2. True discipleship
3. Industry (hard work)
4. Curiosity, beauty, and creativity
5. Connection with Nature
6. Music
7. Knowledge of history
8. True human sexuality
9. Leadership
10. Worship

As he raced along, throttle wide open and no muffler, an elderly gentleman a few rows ahead of us on the aisle, right under the nose of the preacher, apparently had been lulled into sleep by the evenly paced, "white noise" of the speaker. At last, his chin came to rest on his chest, and he was gone from consciousness. The preacher obviously noticed this, his eyes had been perhaps scanning the room for anyone who lost focus, and he stopped talking and took another gulp of water. Silence reigned, and, oddly, the sleeper jerked himself awake at the change. But as soon as the preacher resumed, the elderly gentleman began nodding again, so as a last resort, the preacher began punctuating his points by clapping his hands about once a minute.

That woke everyone up.

On the far side of the seating, two of the Rockcastle County government guys and gals stood side-by-side, facing the crowd, and looking every bit like professional funeral director assistants with their oily, practiced grief. I may have been the only one in the crowd whose attention wandered enough to notice their forcefully suppressed glee, which nevertheless leaked out around the edges of their charade.

As I mentioned, the sermon began as a severe critique of contemporary Christianity, and yet there was another surprise. At the end, the preacher paused, finished gulping down his glass of water, and in a normal, gentle tone of voice that riveted everyone, including the county people, within the space of two minutes, he reaffirmed the historic teachings and traditions of the church. Totally unexpected, and because his critique was so much on target (which allowed me to trust him), totally convincing.

The last thing the preacher said won me over completely. "Y'all enjoy the rest of your evening. It's a party, I hear. This is what Rufus and Josephine wanted. And all the people said…"

"Amen!"

It may be hard to believe, but I was converted on the spot.

That conversion was only in my head as philosophy, and what we experienced next that evening began winning me over in an application within human culture.

Nothing spectacular, but real without affectation or artifice. Real and human.

After the sermon, I thought for sure that there would be eulogies with the usual never-before-heard scandalous or inspiring story about the deceased, but the county government people left toward the parking area in a hurry, and everyone else just meandered away to set up or join in with festive activities. Food of all sorts, field games like trick horseback riding, and best of all for Vanessa and me, musical ensembles here and there—primarily with banjo, fiddles, and guitars, and the occasional mandolin playing a primitive kind of bluegrass, but without a whiny tenor. Songs, when there were any, told stories, like a ballad. I never have heard anything like this before.

The stage where the auction was to be called from on the following day was dark and empty.

Vanessa and I, with Willet and Plover, as JT suggested, settled down in comfy outdoor chairs under a shade tree near a trio of young people, the oldest of which was no older than my Sophia

and the Siler girls. All three had the most serious looks on their faces and did not play to the crowd around them to the slightest degree. They were not showman, but musicians who loved what they did.

About then, Clinton sauntered by. Not really sauntered, but strolling quick-step with two young women close behind him. He looked like he was on a mission, but when he spotted us, he came over. "Are you enjoying yourselves? Mr. and Mrs. IRS?"

Vanessa, always forthright, said, "I've never been called that before."

The young man looked honestly abashed, and the girls who had caught up with him clucked their tongues. Lightly clucked. "Sorry, ma'am," he said. "Mr. and Mrs. Rose. How is your evening? I hope you are enjoying yourselves?"

"Very much so, thank you," Vanessa answered.

"If this wasn't a memorial service and if my dad wasn't here, we'd have dancing," and he and his devoted female entourage moved on.

"Dancing?" I called behind him. "Who's your dad?"

He had heard and turned around. "The preacher." And he and they were gone.

As darkness fell, lights slowly sprang up all over, and some of them were lightning bugs flashing and dancing in the trees. A pack of children swarmed over and took seats with us. Three of them I knew: Scotty and the Siler girls. I didn't notice my oldest among them.

"Where's Sophia?" The girls all laughed, or giggled. Not much difference at that age.

"Right here in front of you," she said.

It wasn't until she stood next to me and put her arm around my neck did I recognize my girl. It must have been the dim light, or that she was wearing clothing unlike anything predictable within her fashion sense.

The girls, all of them and even Scotty, laughed wholeheartedly until Sophia explained, "The Silers loaned me an outfit. Mine didn't fit in here so well. Besides, I like it; it's kind of a retro-pioneer."

"I'm sure we'll be seeing it on the runways of Milan and Paris within the year," Vanessa said.

"I don't think so," Sophia said. "They aren't that intelligent in the so-called, high fashion world." She then leaned toward my ear and stage-whispered, "Can I get a tattoo?"

"Nooo!" I blurted. "No!"

"Plu-ease! Mom said I could."

No answer from me. I already said no, and her mother and I had agreed on a list of things either of us could veto.

"No, she didn't!" Willet and Plover sang. "You told us."

If I had been more observant and less shocked, I would have noticed the Siler girls were barely containing their guffaws.

"Kidding, Dad. I'm trying to get your goat."

Scotty at last made a contribution. "My parents say you don't want to appear to be a person who makes decisions they will regret in the future."

Sophia leaned back, wide-eyed, and said, "That settles it. No tattoos for Bonzo."

"Who's Bonzo?" Scotty asked.

"You never watch old movies? Ask your parents, kid,"—advice which was well-timed because JT, Isabel, and their little ones joined us.

Vanessa yawned big and we all agreed with her. The babies were half asleep already, and those of us still awake settled down and quietly listened to the music for the rest of the evening.

Saturday Morning
The Auction

Thunderstorms rolled in during the night. The children woke up after midnight and were apprehensive about the roars and crashes until I urged them onto the balcony to watch. We were just under enough cover not to get too wet.

"Fireworks. Nature's fireworks," Vanessa said. "I'm as patriotic as anybody, but this is much better than the 4th of July."

We had a good view to the east so we could see a long way. Mountains of clouds towering over mountains of vegetation-clad

earth and rocks. Brilliant, illuminating flashes followed by rolling, echoing rumbles.

"I'm no weatherman, but I've read some books," I said.

"Books?" Sophia said.

"Sound travels 1125 feet every second, and light is practically instantaneous. So, you can figure out how far away the lightning strikes are. That's about five seconds a mile."

"Books?"

"And lightning really doesn't echo all that much. What you are hearing is sound from a single strike coming from varied points as it rips across the sky."

With perfect timing, an especially bright and alarming flash tore across the heavens right in front of us from south to north. Right in front of us!

Sophia counted. "One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand," and then the thunder began, lasting at least another four seconds. "Cool, Dad. Do you still have any of those weather books around?"

"You three—four of you—better get back in bed," Vanessa said. "We can't sleep in tomorrow."

"Big day," I said.

It was a big day, bigger than anyone thought it would be, even the Master of Inexplicable Big-Stuff, Jonathan T. Barron, though he'd cringe if he heard me calling him that…

In the morning, at the entrance to the Siler property, at the fork in the gravel road with the mailboxes, a large colorful, mostly green and yellow sign (at least 4 x 8 feet in size) had been mounted upon a couple six-by-six posts right in front of the No Outlet sign. Large letters and a map with lots marked out.

Wandering Pines
"Where Paradise is Home"
99 lots of at Least 9 Acres Each

In smaller letters, the sign said:

Community Center with Saline Swimming Lanes
9-Hole Championship Golf Course
ABC Shop
Helicopter Pad
Permitting Custom Homes of 4,000 Square Feet or Greater

At the bottom in the smallest print: A Rooster Lamp Community.

There was an acrylic brochure holder in the corner, but it was empty. The sign had been covered by a brown canvas tarp, but someone had pulled the tarp down, and it was lying in a heap on the ground.

The crowd of people was much the same as at the memorial service, but with fewer children and a whole lot of grim or sleazy adults. Land speculators, I guessed. Some of the grim people were locals. Like during the first part of the service, the mood prior to the auction was serious, but with tension in the air, like when the wind thrashes the trees and the air pressure drops prior to a thunderstorm. I mean, seriously serious. Even the Sheriff's deputies were serious. I'm kidding—they're always serious, but what worried me is, I couldn't tell whose side they were on.

"I'm taking the girls up to the fishing pond," Vanessa said. "Maybe up into the woods. I'm not sure this will be something they should see."

I said, "Good idea," but it was drowned out by Sophia's "Are you kidding me? I'm not missing this, and Scotty is here. Over there by his dad. He's younger than me."

Across the way at a picnic table in front of a barn, JT was checking his sound and transmission equipment, and Scotty, inspecting a video camera.

"See you later, honey," Vanessa said, as she and Willet and Plover headed toward the road up to the woods.

"Recording your program today? Here?" I asked JT.

"Why not? I'm connected to a satellite, so it will be live. I sent out a notification to my followers yesterday, and we already have 70,000 of them tuned in."

"That's so cool," Sophia said. "Can I help?"

"She can watch the sound board and guard the SatLink," Scotty said, "so I can film without distractions."

"Can I, Dad?"

"Can she, Pop?"

"Can you run a sound board?" JT asked Sophia.

"How hard can it be? She's pretty good at tech," I said, as Sophia vigorously nodded Yes.

"Okay. Scotty; running the camera is more fun, but between the two, the transmission—telling the story—is more important. The video is for security and won't be on the live feed.

"Security?" I asked. "You think there will be trouble?"

JT thought half a minute before answering. "Not what you're thinking. The crowd here is wound up tight, but… unusual things always happen during my show. If people are around, there's no telling how they'll react."

"They might stampede," Scotty said.

JT laughed. "Not likely, but you never know. The important thing is not to allow the transmitter unit to get tipped over and disconnected from the battery. Or the sound board to get bumped or monkeyed with."

"Who's more likely to get rough?" I asked. "The county, or the locals? Rooster Lamp's 'Where Paradise is Home' sign can't have helped the mood."

JT glanced over to a cluster of smug county administrators who were standing under their special tree with the portly Sheriff. "Neither. Everyone expects the sale to go through to a developer for an obscene price. It's more that the local people have to be here to witness when their beloved land is stolen."

"The camera is for Just in Case," Scotty said.

"Dad's carrying his gun," Sophia said.

When Scotty and Sophia were distracted, JT leaned toward my ear and whispered, "I'm more concerned about the developers acting up if the sale fails."

"Really? How would that happen?"

JT shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. I could tell he was honest with me and really didn't know.

"Where's your wife?" I asked. "I haven't seen her this morning."

"She's talking with people and will be attending the auction."

"Aren't you afraid for her?

"Isabel? Not at all. I'll tell you a secret. Don't tell her I told you this. She was a cop in California before we married. On our honeymoon in Greenland, she shot and killed a cannibalistic maniac who was holding Scotty at gunpoint."

I was flabbergasted and didn't know what to say. He had said this straight out with no particular drama like it had been an everyday event.

"What are your plans," he asked to help me escape my awkwardness.

"I'm just going to walk around and observe."

I did walk around. I'm the kind of person who is content to watch people as much as talk to them or participate in social activities. Which is why I became an accountant. It's only because I did a little firearms training that the IRS let me travel and perform investigations. Though, they often sent me on projects that promised little in the way of benefit to the U.S. Government.

What I noticed in the scene before me was a general movement of groups or interests, like chess, the strategic placement of the pieces in attack or defense.

The first move seemed to be an abrupt exit of those I assumed were the Rooster Lamp Community people. These guys and gals in suits and white hard hats looked like their Super Bowl football team had just been kicked in the butt. Faces down, shoulders drooping, feet dragging. They glanced up at me and merely shook their heads.

Close behind them followed the Rockcastle County underlings and behind them the Sheriff, who seemed to have been

caught off guard by something and struggled to catch up with the Rooster Lamp team, but gave up the chase and returned.

The most arrogant of the mob next stepped up to me—the annoying Laugher-in-the-Restaurant when I first arrived. "We know who you are, IRS. It's your fault. What were you doing at the chicken house on the Siler land? You and those dangerous, unschooled Siler girls? And Jonathan Trickster Barron. Has he put a curse on the land, or what?"

"I'd be careful what you say about JT Barron in public, School Board."

"You threatening me, son?" He flexed his muscles and glared at me, and the Sheriff himself stepped up, breathless, his hand on his sidearm.

"Not at all. I just know how protective Barron is about his reputation. He's won several handsome settlements from people who have called him a fraud in public."

The Sheriff pulled School Board back and spoke to him confidentially. School Board jerked his head to the right, where Sophia was filming him (she waved, wiggling her fingers) and then to the left toward the Rooster Lamp team, who had reached the parking area and were talking with the Rockcastle Underlings.

He forgot his pride and everything except what he valued most and hustled toward the Rooster Lamps, Sophia following him at a safe distance.

I headed toward the stage where the auction was to commence in about 20 minutes. Seats were filling up, mostly locals, but among them the poker-faced land speculators, definitely not like the polished Rooster Lamps. In the front row sat Isabel Barron, who was surrounded by an odd assortment of people. One of the Siler girls was holding the Barron baby, Abby. The people who were gathered around tried to keep their business private, but, being a money guy, I could detect the subtle signs of what was happening.

For example, when a young man with a young wife came before Isabel, the husband slyly reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick green wad of bills. Isabel took the cash, counted it, and the younger Siler girl wrote down the amount. I'm not bad at lip

reading, and the amount, $73.00. Isabel tucked the money into a quilted diaper bag.

I joined the group, and when my turn came, I asked, "What are you doing?"

She smiled wanly and said, "I know it's hopeless, but it's just happening. People started giving me money. Word went around. I'm making a bid today."

"How much do you have so far?"

She told me.

"That's not even enough for a minimum bid increase."

"I know. If nothing else, it's symbolic. It's a statement."

"I'll say." I pulled out what little cash I had in my pocket, pushed it into her hands, and sighing, started walking away.

"Wait… $200. Thanks. We'll give it back to you later today, afterwards."

"It's okay. Donate it to the local history museum."

"Write that down," she said to the Siler record keeper.

"Have you registered to bid?"

"People only started giving me money a few minutes ago. I haven't had time. The auctioneer was kind enough to give me the form and said I can turn it in anytime before the auction ends. Can Vanessa help me? The baby needs to be fed."

The auctioneers had finished their stage set up stage, had tested the sound system, and the auctioneer himself was explaining how the auction would proceed, and the terms of completing the sale, which had to be done by 6:PM that evening in order to be valid, when the Rooster Lamp crew all returned relaxed and refreshed, as well as the county people, their smug composures fully restored. More chess moves.

What was going on? I had no idea. Just then, Vanessa, Willet, and Plover came up.

"I thought you planned to avoid—" I began.

"You won't believe what we saw up there, Dad," said Plover. Willet caught them on video."

"We can't miss this," Willet said. "Scotty told us that something big will happen. It always does."

"And I want to give some money to Isabel," Vanessa said.

I didn't have the heart to disillusion them. "That's fine. She asked if you could help her with something. Just be careful. I'm going to walk the perimeter." I was about to say that I couldn't bear watching the bloodbath, but that would have been a bad reference under the tense circumstances.

Soon after I left the immediate auction area, the auctioneer began his chant. He would have been a match for the preacher in rapidity of speech and strength of style.

I hadn't ever served in the military or taken any sort of security workshops, but I had watched enough entertaining action-adventure television programs to foolishly feel that I might know something, and keeping an eye on things seemed a good thing to do. It couldn't hurt.

It was lonely. Everywhere but the auction area had been abandoned. I walked to where I could see the old farmhouse higher up the hill. "How you doing, IRS!?" A voice called from the front porch. Amazing how far sound travelled up there. Looking closely, I could see it was Clinton, probably with his female admirers. I waved.

Strange. He isn't worried, I said to myself. Another chess piece. What does it mean?

I walked back toward the auction just as a classic Volvo diesel wagon pulled up and parked right in the road behind the barn between me and the auction. The driver jumped out of his seat, and before closing the door, his hand resting on the roof of the vehicle, he scanned the whole horizon. "I don't hear a thing," he said to me in a spooky voice.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He looked at me closely and decided I could be trusted.

"I'm a friend of Jonathan's from way back. My name is Atlas." He put out his hand and shook mine warmly.

"My name is…"

"Wait. Wait. It's not Mr. IRS, but you work for the federal government."

"Did Barron tell you?"

"Jonathan? No, no. He doesn't know I'm here. Haven't spoken to him in years, but I heard about today's show, and I had to be here. To help."

"What do you do, exactly?"

"I'm a… I'm a… Professional fisherman. No, I won't lie this time. Forget what I said. Do you hear anything strange?"

"Professional fisherman? What a coincidence!"

"No! Please, just forget it. I'm not… What do you hear right now?"

I listened. "Just the auctioneer, crickets, the stream, and a little bit of breeze in the trees."

"Good. That's good. Of course you don't. I already knew that. It probably means you're a decent person and/or you don't live on this property." He finally closed the door of his car.

"How do you know this?" I asked, but he didn't seem to hear me. "I'll see you later, friend," he said, and trotted in the direction of the auction while muttering, "Hurry, hurry."

I walked around a little more and spotted Sophia way up the windmill ladder with her video camera. I was beginning to wonder if I shouldn't miss the auction, either, when I came around a corner and almost bumped into the loud-mouthed School Board chairman with a phone mashed against his ear. He was so intent on his conversation, and no doubt had his other ear tuned to the auction, so he did not notice me. I eased back behind the corner. This is what I heard him say, to the best I can remember.

"All is well. I talked the Rooster people back. I said that if there was anything spooky, it was all faked, some outsider charlatan fraudster trying to scare people."

He paused to listen. The voice on the other end of the line was female.

"Yeah," he replied. "The Rooster people said they had a different concern, but I know they were just trying to save face."

Another listening pause.

"No, we didn't set an absolute minimum. Why should we do that? It only shows weakness and a lack of confidence. I tell you, we'll make a fortune for the county, and thus for the public school system. It might launch my political career."

Another pause. Listening.

"Yes, dear. Yes. And maybe something nice for us for our wedding anniversary. But…"

Pause.

"The auction will be over soon. I'll pick up some antacids on the way home, dear, like you asked. Your favorite lavender flavor. What did you say?... No, please don't come… You are on your way already?... Almost here? Oh, damn. I need to hang up now and see how the auction is going… Right. See you in a few minutes. Don't bump into anybody when you park."

Well, wasn't I a fool for thinking this revelation would make me a hero. I first thought the School Board Chairman might be talking with a mobster, and then probably his mistress, but it turned out to be his dyspeptic wife.

I slowly walked up to the old farmhouse, climbed the steps, and sat in a rocker next to Clinton, who was wearing a food-stained bibbed apron. He only nodded, sighed, and we sat there for a while without talking. The sounds of cheerful feminine voices and the clatter of jars and cooking pots, and a warm fruity smell, came from the open door behind us.

Then out of the blue, he said, "The cats—the panthers—only allow the people who live here to see them. Because they trust them. And often, they scream about people nearby who can't be trusted—who make them nervous."

"Is that what it is? I thought panthers were extinct here."

"Maybe only evil people hear the screaming."

I decided not to open the can of worms.

We sat and rocked a while longer. It might have been minutes, or it might have been decades, when a shockingly loud roar of voices lifted up into the sky. A cheering roar. We sprinted side-by-side to the auction.

What we witnessed was nothing remotely like what I anticipated seeing. Everyone was smiling and shaking hands all around. Even the Rooster Lamp people joined in, grinning wildly, their hard hats and jackets off, shirts partly unbuttoned and ties tucked away. A crowd had gathered around Isabel. The Siler girls whistled shrilly through their fingers. Everyone was talking all at once. Everyone was laughing or crying. Some had fallen on the ground in tears. One elderly gentleman dancing with his cane had wet his pants, but didn't seem to care. Applause broke out all over. Another rousing cheer. And another. JT, talking quietly into his microphone and Scotty guarding the equipment beside him,

watched with mild confusion and amusement. Willet and Plover ran up and hugged me tightly. Vanessa followed along, looking stunned, and said, "I need to talk with you." Sophia shouted from the windmill, her high-pitched voice soaring above the din. The only people not fully sharing in the infective, universal joy were the auctioneers, who only looked bewildered about the something that apparently had happened, but even they couldn't help but smile once in a while about the scene before them.

The School Board Chairman—his wife-apparent pulling him by his oversized arm—stopped to glower at me. His wife gave him a hard tug, and while fearfully scanning the horizon, he allowed himself to be extracted, or rather, rescued from danger, real, imaginary, or within himself.

Sunday
Yesterday's *Strange Days Radio* Broadcast

The best way I can think of to tell the rest of the story is through JT's perspective as it happened live when he was interviewing people and capturing the scene. So, I'm attaching the transcript of his program and will maybe add some explanations.

To save time, I begin the transcript after the standard introductory material (theme song, etc.) and a description of the setting. In fact, after reading through the entire transcript again, there's so much in it I already told, I'm only going to include the new material.

JONATHAN May I ask you a few questions?

MARY SUE That's fine.

JONATHAN What brings you to the auction?

MARY SUE Interesting perspective. You might well ask what brings the auction to me.

JONATHAN Oh. So, you are a resident on the property. How long have you lived here?

MARY SUE All my life, but many of my ancestors lived here since before anyone remembers. We have a house up one of the branches. Mostly off-grid.

JONATHAN You are a Native American?

MARY SUE I prefer being thought of as Early. Just Early, like before the Europeans. I mean, who is truly native or indigenous anywhere? If you go back far enough, everyone is from somewhere else. This world is not our home. And American? America is a European word. I'm a citizen of the United States.

JONATHAN What's your name and occupation?

MARY SUE My name is Mary Sue, but I'm reserving my family name. I'm a medical doctor in the area. I do what's called Direct Primary Care. I don't take any sort of insurance. Most of my patients pay with cash, but many with produce or services. Our little corner of the world thrives on bartering.

JONATHAN With your background, do you have any special approach to medicine?

MARY SUE I don't want to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of modern medicine right now. What may be unique is, our family has always collected medicines from the forests and fields. Many of which formed the basis of our more common medications on the shelf.

JONATHAN Do you collect them from this land?

MARY SUE We do. Here and elsewhere. My brothers and nieces and nephews do this work. When the Chief, my ancestor, sold the Silers this land in 1790, he retained the right for his descendants to hunt, fish, and gather here forever. And live here, too, so long as they didn't make trouble.

JONATHAN Do you have any children?

MARY SUE For better or worse, richer or poorer, I've never married. <LAUGHING>

JONATHAN You're still young.

MARY SUE Yes, young enough to still bear children, but men today aren't as brave today as they once were. A female doctor intimidates them.

JONATHAN Brave? Might some people think that's a racial term?

MARY SUE <LAUGHING> I hadn't thought about it, and now it's funny. We never used a special word in our family to describe men. They were men, as distinguished from women.

JONATHAN Apart from the usual basic requirements for a prospective husband, what one other attribute or interest would your guy have to possess?

MARY SUE You're a strange person. So personal. How big is your audience?

JONATHAN Pretty big.

MARY SUE How do I know nobody will bother me?

JONATHAN I'll make sure they don't. The crazy people in my audience are afraid of me. I don't put up with schtick.

MARY SUE Well, he'd have to be a dancer.

JONATHAN What kind?

MARY SUE Any kind, except ballet and jazz. I like couple dancing.

JONATHAN Okay. Noted. Do you feel a strong connection with the past on this property?

MARY SUE <LISTENING> How could I not? The past is here now. Can you hear it in the mountains around us? I mean, right now? Do you hear her?

JONATHAN I don't know what you mean.

MARY SUE Can you hear the past from the earth, air, and water? Most people are not aware of how many souls lived and are buried here. The past is a burden. Remembering past wrongs others have done to us is painful. Remembering past joys gives us pain too, because they are gone. We enjoy the good of the past by being satisfied with the good we were able to accomplish today. But that only lasts until the next morning when we start over again. Another good are the stories of when we as a people, as a family, overcame, because it gives us courage and hope for overcoming difficulties yet to come.

JONATHAN Well said. So you're the medicine woman of the village.

MARY SUE <LAUGHING> Yes, yes, though, again, I never thought of that before. You're helping me.

JONATHAN Thank you for your time this afternoon. She's gone already.

<SOUNDS OF THE BIDDING STARTING>

JONATHAN Okay, let's now talk with one of the developers here, all dressed up, suit and tie. Excuse me. May I

speak with you a few minutes about your plans for the property? Why did—

DEVELOPER ONE Umm. You should talk with the boss. Sir, this gentleman with the microphone has some questions.

DEVELOPER TWO Yes, sir. What do you need?

JONATHAN My name is—

DEVELOPER TWO I don't care who you are, and I don't care who knows what. I'm an open book.

JONATHAN Okay. Are you sure? Yes, you are sure. Well then, your team left the auction and it looked like you were leaving, but some government official followed you to the parking area, talked to you, and then you all came back. What was th—

DEVELOPER TWO You saw that, huh? That's not exactly right, but close. The School Board Chairman is delusional. He hears screams. Thinks the property is under a curse. Yes, we changed our minds about bidding, but not because of him, even if he is a sorry S-O-B.

JONATHAN Why did—

DEVELOPER TWO I'm going to tell you, aren't I? When we first took interest in the property, we didn't know what was up here. We didn't know that people lived up here. The property had been in the family for a couple centuries. The county only told us what was legally required.

JONATHAN Were the optics of relocating—

DEVELOPER TWO Who do you think we are, huh? We're builders. We don't tear down nice things. What this family has here is beautiful.

JONATHAN When did you first begin to question buying the property?

DEVELOPER TWO That's your first decent question. The county was rushing the sale, so we didn't have time to do our own evaluation. You know, so we thought if the bidding didn't run up too high, we could purchase it and resell later.

JONATHAN When did—

DEVELOPER TWO The county held a meeting with us and some other builders on Thursday. They gave us a live drone tour. We have our own drones—better drones—but they wanted other developers there, too, so that wouldn't have worked. I

couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was a place I'd like to live. And those girls and the boy at the chicken house? <LAUGHING AND MORE LAUGHING> And you were there, too, I believe. That's when I knew most of the county government people were insane, because they kept saying the audio was off kilter. It wasn't. I heard it all.

<MORE LAUGHING>

JONATHAN What about the sign at the entrance? Whispering Pines?

DEVELOPER TWO Those [deleted] county people!!! It's not our sign. We sent them a file of a mock-up of what we were thinking. Whispering Pines was a joke. It's a movie or something. TV. Ask one of my assistants if you need more.

JONATHAN So, you're walking away from the project?

DEVELOPER TWO Of course not. Well, this one, yes. I've met some good people, and I'd like to help them if they need help. But this isn't it.

JONATHAN Won't someone else buy the property and develop it?

DEVELOPER TWO You mean ruin it? They might. That's the sad part. Personally, I want to buy the property and give it back to the family, but my investors won't let me. Not so quick, anyway, without visiting the place themselves. I own the lion's share of the company, but it's not all my money.

JONATHAN If you're not bidding, why are you here?

DEVELOPER TWO <LONG PAUSE> After seeing the School Board Chairman's naked greed, we can't leave yet. Want to see what happens. I gave that nice Hispanic lady the cash in my pocket and after I saw her beautiful baby, Abby, I think her name was, I wrote a small check. I believe she's bidding. Worth a try.

JONATHAN Abby's my daughter. Isabel, my wife.

DEVELOPER TWO [pause] She did you a favor when she married you, huh?

JONATHAN For sure. What's your name, if I may ask?

DEVELOPER TWO Rooster Lamp

JONATHAN Your name is Rooster Lamp? I thought the name was a metaphor.

DEVELOPER TWO It isn't a metaphor. Oh, but it is, too, though not a good one. My real name is Lawrence Lamp, but Larry Lamp doesn't sound right either, huh?

JONATHAN Thank you for your time, Mr. Lamp.

DEVELOPER TWO Everybody calls me Rooster.

JONATHAN Then, thank you, Roo—

DEVELOPER TWO What's your name, son?

JONATHAN Jonathan Barron.

DEVELOPER TWO Hmm. Seems like I've heard the name before now. Oh, I almost forgot. I bought the old opera house in your town on Friday. Intend to fix it up nice.

[DELETED BIDDING, STILL GOING ON]

JONATHAN Who is— It's Atlas! [Shouting] ATLAS, OVER HERE! ATLAS! Sorry folks. I need to talk with him.

<PAUSE>

<NOISE OF THE AUCTION IN PROGRESS>

ATLAS Made it!

JONATHAN Just in time. Live radio, people. Atlas worked for, or I should say *with* me years ago when I was just starting. Norway, right?

ATLAS Portland, Camas, Norway. The sleep guy. Aliens. Lovely medieval princess.

JONATHAN Yes. We have all our shows archived, so you all can look it up. But, what brings you here?

ATLAS I had a feeling. Somebody posted a drone video of this property online. You were in it. And your son, some girls, chickens. A video of a video. Secretly recorded. When I played it, there was something off in the room where the showing was. Some people were freaking out. They said they heard a woman being attacked. But not everyone heard it. Weird! So, I'm here.

JONATHAN The room was where a private meeting hosted by Rockcastle County for the potential buyers of this property was held.

ATLAS That's what it was?

JONATHAN Can I tell them your secret?

ATLAS Which one? Oh. I pick up stuff most people don't notice. Kind of a hyper-sensitivity to what's in the environment.

JONATHAN Most people would call you a psychic.

ATLAS <VOCALIZED SOUND OF SHUDDERING> Hate that label. It's not me. I'm an edge of the normal spectrum.

JONATHAN I know. What have you been doing lately? Since Norway?

ATLAS You know we don't have much time before the auction ends? I worked with law enforcement, hunting down bad guys. A bloodhound. Let me tell you what's going on here…

JONATHAN Atlas is walking around listening and watching people. He's coming back.

ATLAS Okay. A few people… greedy, bad people are afraid. They keep glancing around like something might attack them. A few more of the people are… sad, and they are hearing something that gives them a good feeling. Some are excited. And most of the rest here are sad, but excited and hopeful. That's just a general impression.

JONATHAN Do you hear anything?

ATLAS No, no. I'm not in the Hearing Strange Things club, or whatever. Are you? If she could stand up, I'd dance with her. Huh? I didn't hear that, but it's what somebody is thinking. Somebody right here.

JONATHAN How's your love life?

ATLAS You're brutal. You're cruel. In revenge, I should ask you what the "T" of your middle name stands for. But I'll give you an honest answer. You'd think with my sensitivity, I'd have an advantage in the dating world. But I don't pick up those kinds of signals. Not at all. I'm still holding out for Mrs. Atlas.

JONATHAN Apart from the usual basic requirements for a prospective wife, what one other attribute or interest would your gal have to possess?

ATLAS Are you a matchmaker now?

JONATHAN Are you going to answer?

ATLAS No. Yes. No. There aren't any. The basics are good. They're rare. I can't afford to be any more picky.

JONATHAN You're still dancing, aren't you?

ATLAS I'm good on my feet; it's my romantic tone deafness getting me into trouble. What's the bidding up to now?

JONATHAN Listen, yourself.

ATLAS $12 million. That's. That's. That's, divided by 2172 acres… That's six grand an acre. $6,000.

JONATHAN That's a very low price so far. Who's bidding? I haven't been able to pay attention.

ATLAS The hulky guy bellowing his bids.

JONATHAN The School Board Chairman?! What? Why is he bidding? And Vanessa Rose?! Where did she get that kind of money!? This is wild. I don't know what's happening here, folks. I'm worried. Let's listen in for a while.

ATLAS They're raising each other by 100 grand at a time!

<LONG STRETCH OF SOUNDS OF THE AUCTION, & CROWD NOISE BUILDING TOWARD A CLIMAX>

ATLAS A woman in a lavender dress just put her hand over Steroid Strongman's mouth!

AUCTIONEER Going once, going twice!

<THE GAVEL>

AUCTIONEER AND SOLD! FOR 12 THOUSAND 9 HUNDRED AND 2 DOLLARS!!!TO THE LADY IN FRONT HOLDING PADDLE NUMBER FOUR-TWO AND STANDING NEXT TO THE TWO GIRLS FLAPPING THEIR WINGS, CROWING, AND SPINNING IN PLACE.

ATLAS Did I hear right? $12,902. For the whole thing? Not 13 million?

Atlas and JT stopped talking and let the audience hear the celebratory crowd sounds. At some point, the connection was lost and the broadcast went dead. A few minutes later, JT came back live and then, as you see, interviewed me.

JONATHAN Sorry, people. My 10-year-old son is running my portable sound board, and one of the revelers bumped him and disconnected a cable. Thanks, Scotty. Not your fault, son. You're doing great.

Now we have the husband of the purchaser of the property here to talk, Vernon Rose. His three daughters are standing beside him. How do you feel, Vernon, about being the new owners of Screaming Panther Cove?

VERNON I'm numb. We're not officially the owners yet. Vanessa's making the payment as we speak. Cash. Usually, on a large property purchase, you only have to pay a percentage now and the rest at closing. But we are paying 100 percent now. And we are only the owners on paper. All the people who gave money to Isabel are owners. You and your wife are. And my daughter. She put in $30 of her own money.

JONATHAN What are your plans for the property?

VERNON First, we have to survive the court challenges from the county. They're furious. But we already have our local legal team. So many have stepped up, including Mr. Lester Gudger from town. We might draw in some national talent, too.

JONATHAN What plans for when you win your cases? Which I'm sure you will.

VERNON Plans? Nothing. Just leave the people who live here alone. Let them live the life they have lived forever.

JONATHAN Will you pay property taxes?

VERNON Listen, that's a battle down the road. We'll see.

JONATHAN What about you personally? What are your plans for the future?

VERNON I haven't spoken with Vanessa yet, but Clinton, a young man who helped Rufus and Josephine Siler, invited us to live in the old Siler farmhouse.

YOUNG FEMALE VOICE Hell, yeah!

JONATHAN, ASCIDE Sophia, where did you learn to speak like that?

SOPHIA Oh. Sorry, Dad, I've been hanging out with the Siler girls.

JONATHAN Clinton goes back to college soon. The farmhouse will be empty now that Rufus and Josephine are gone.

SOPHIA Can I share something amazing, Mr. JT? Dad?

JONATHAN Sure.

SOPHIA When Vanessa, Willet, and Plover walked up to the woods here before the auction. Wait. Willet, you were there, I wasn't. You tell it. She's my half-sister.

WILLET When we walked up the hill, we sat down on the bench to enjoy the view. It was a long time.

PLOVER No, it wasn't.

WILLET It seemed like a long, long time. We heard some strange noises, like a high-pitched whistling, then some rustling. And into the opening ran two tawny-grey, long-tailed cats. Bigger than Fatty Richlard, our house cat. A lot bigger. But then, a huge cat trotted out. She purred a certain way, curled up on the ground, and the two cubs ran up and started nursing. Right in front of us, down on the other side of the cemetery.

JONATHAN A panther. They're supposed to be extinct here. They've come back down in Florida.

PLOVER It's *supposed* to be a secret they're not extinct. We don't want hunters or nature-gawkers to know. You there in radio land, better keep your damn mouths shut.

WILLET Yeah. Look at this. I filmed this video on my phone. It's zoomed all the way in tight.

<LONG SILENCE>

JONATHAN Well. I don't know what to say. I've seen a lot of what people call supernatural. But as far as I can tell, most of those things have been natural phenomena that we don't yet understand. This experience—what the girls saw near the family cemetery is one of those super-natural experiences. The ghost cats.

SOPHIA It's super, for sure.

VERNON The real mystery is how the property sold for so little money. Why didn't the big money people who were present here bid? $5.94 an acre is what the price might have been over a hundred years ago.

JONATHAN I wonder… We may never receive rational answers to those mystifying questions.

Afterwards
Epilogue

The program lasted another few minutes after what I've included, but no more answers were to be found during the immediate aftermath of the auction.

When I finally got a chance to talk with Vanessa, she told me Rooster Lamp had written a check for $10,000 to add to Isabel's auction fund. She said he thought hers a noble effort and didn't want to be repaid. The "token" could go to anybody Isabel wanted. Like, he suggested, toward scholarships for children who lived on the Siler land. As I already noted from the School Board Chairman, the county had not required a minimum sale price, so the auctioneer's base fee and the tiny commission ate most of 12 grand. The auctioneer gave that money back to Isabel. The county's cut was insignificant.

Vanessa also said Rooster had gone around and talked with the other developers who were present at the auction, and I don't know what he told them, but none of them offered any bids. Vanessa thought they had stayed to watch what would happen.

We decided we'd move to the Siler property as soon as I tied up some loose ends with my work with the IRS and sell our house in Virginia. I'd need to start up an accounting business and help people with their taxes. Maybe down the road, work with Clinton in his fight against property taxes. Sophia said she'd sue for emancipation when she turned 16 and come live with us full-time, visiting her mom on her own schedule. Willet and Plover are thrilled to make a home in this…. I won't call it paradise.

This place of human-dimensioned civilization.

As for the shockingly low sale price for the land: One of my jobs with the IRS was to thoroughly understand and apply the regulations on capital gains taxes. It might seem to be an esoteric subject for a story like this, but what's called "the basis" is a clue to the numbers. The tax is far too complex for a normal human, and even most accountants only punch numbers into their expensive software to figure the tax.

The relevant point is, I looked up the original sales price of the 2172 acres in 1790. That price would form part of the basis,

since the land was never formally inherited from then on. The original price was 17 cents an acre. Adjusted to today's dollars, it would be almost exactly the sale price at the auction.

I'm not much of a religious, spiritual, let alone superstitious person, but what I don't understand, is why the value of the added roads and buildings wasn't a factor in forming the "basis" with whatever mysterious preservative force is at work in the Siler's Screaming Panther Cove?

It's a place in another kind of time.

END

The Penland Boarding House
Swannanoa, North Carolina

One day in 2014 as my wife and I drove west on I-40 just east of Asheville, I noticed a large old house below us, just on the other side of the railroad tracks. When we had time, I came back, searched down a road or two and came upon the building. A few days later I returned with my new camera and took pictures. A week later, I came back again for more pictures. About 200 in all of most of the rooms and much detail, including the neglected and half-ruined furniture.

After a little online research I found the place was the Penland Boarding House and had a fascinating history.

Years later, in 2025 after Hurricane Helen, we returned to see how the house fared in the flooding that wiped out much of downtown Swannanoa, a catastrophe which at the time received significant national attention.

The house was gone, completely gone. Not from the flood, however. In his place were piles of mulch. A neighbor told us the house had burned back in 2020.

As it turned out, my photos are likely the last records of the house. When I found this out, I gave digital copies of them to the excellent Swannanoa Valley Museum & History Center. The museum, located in downtown Black Mountain, NC, leads historical hikes throughout our area and seems to have a number of fine programs. The museum gave me permission to use the 1911 photograph on the previous page.

A little true story. On my first drive along the Swannanoa River after the Helene flooding, I saw how shockingly trashed and destroyed everything was. It looked hopeless. I can't tell you how bad without pages and pages. But then I saw a few people in vests cleaning up! Bravely picking at and bagging tiny bits from the mountains of overwhelming refuse and destruction. I stopped my truck to inquire of a gentleman. When he said he was volunteering with the Swannanoa Valley Museum, I almost cried.

So many old houses and barns in our area fall into ruin and eventually are torn down. At the very least, they should be photographed and described in technical detail, preserved this way for posterity. Another fine organization in our area is the Appalachian Barn Alliance. Their resident historian estimates 20,000 barns still standing in some condition or other in Madison County alone. He works to photograph the barns and make architectural drawings. They also give tours. If old barns and their different styles interests you, as they do Vernon Rose, pick up a copy of Eric Sloane's beautiful illustrated book, An Age of Barns.

If you have read my story in this small volume, you know that it's at least partly about a kind of life fast disappearing. Like the barns. I won't endeavor to speak for or interpret the story here, but simply to point to the connection between it and my photographs. The story is set in the mountains of western North Carolina, but I don't say where. I don't know where, anyway, so I couldn't tell you.

For a few more details about the history of the Penland Boarding House, search for articles in the Black Mountain News.

The author and his wife, Edith, in December, 2013

The slat-back/ hickory-bark-split chair shown in this book is one of a dozen we inherited from Edith's parents, who took her and her siblings as young people to meet Shadrach "Birdie" Mace, of the Mace family of chairmakers in the area around Asheville, North Carolina. We aren't certain these are Birdie Mace chairs, but they may be. This chair is fastened with nails, unlike the one repaired by Clinton in the story. For more information on traditional American chair making, look into Eric Sloane's wonderful illustrated book, ***A Reverence for Wood,*** and Andy Glenn's 2023 book, ***Backwoods Chairmakers: In Search of the Appalachian Ladderback Chairmaker***, a beautiful volume rich with photos and profiles. James Cooper,one of the 20 makers featured in *Backwoods Chairmakers*, reseated our chairs.

The Jonathan Barron Stories
In the Order of their Composition

When Earth Whispers JTB 1
An earthquake in Lynchville, CA releases an unthinkable nightmare.

Turtle of the World JTB 2
Monsters are eating the garbage at the Swan Mountain Retreat Center.

Odd Fellows JTB 3
Grandma Middleton always guesses right. Two of her special grandchildren attempt to bust a horrible crime enterprise coming from the highest levels of South Carolina government.

The Greenlandic Windows JTB 4
JTB with his new wife investigate a stone building on the east coast of Greenland that appears to predate humans.

The Long Night Awaits JTB 5
A sleep therapist has a patient who claims each of his nights lasts a year.

The Acme of Egg Evolution JTB 6
Rockcastle County North Carolina conducts a foreclosure auction on property of over 2000 pristine pastoral and wooded acres owned, farmed, and lived on by a single family and their friends since 1790. Color.

Through the Eidetic Plane JTB 7
An Oregon town holds a spring festival every year that commemorates the 1865 hangings of two convicted folk-hero murderers.

Hazel Madding's Ordinary Magic JTB 8
A young English woman disappears while horseback riding alone on her family estate on the day after her wedding.

Find the books by Mickey Hunt on Amazon.